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How to turn around ineffective work teams

by [Terry Bragg](#)

Woody Hayes, former coach of the Ohio State football team, said, "When we get fancy, we get beat." The same is true for teams. When teams have trouble, they should go back to basics.

Ineffective teams usually violate basic principles of team development. By reviewing the fundamentals of teamwork, an ineffective team can transform itself into a high performing team.

To build effective teams, pay attention to the following basics of team development and performance:

Goals. Establish team goals. The team, sponsor, and stakeholders must clarify what the team wants to accomplish. Also, establish clear evidence procedures for each goal. What is the desired outcome and how will the team know if it achieves that outcome? The easiest way to clarify team goals is by writing a team charter that states the goals and criteria for measuring progress.

Here are examples of team goals:

- To reduce by 20 percent the time it takes to fulfill orders.
Deadline: January 1.
- To achieve 90 percent just-in-time delivery by June 15.
- To reduce order entry errors by 10 percent.
Deadline: December 31.
- To sell a million widgets in the month of February.
- To design, manufacture and deliver a functional prototype
to the customer by October.

Accountability. Hold the team accountable for achieving its goals. Define roles and assign responsibility for tasks and duties. Then, track progress. Tracking and reviewing progress is important to maintain group and individual accountability.

Skills and resources. Identify the skills necessary to achieve the team's goals. Make sure the team has those skills. Do not overlook the importance of communication, planning, negotiation and leadership skills. Include people from various disciplines within your company, such as sales, the warehouse, purchasing. Also, identify the resources needed by the team, including material resources and

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support from others. Make sure the team has the resources to be successful.

Approach. Agree upon a common approach early in the team building process. A common approach helps the team pull together. The approach is how you work together to achieve the team's goal. It can be both technical and interpersonal.

The team's approach includes formal and informal procedures to communicate, solve problems and reach objectives, and the ways members interact with each other and those outside the team. For example, some teams use formal, systematic problem-solving methods, while others are less formal and more intuitive. Some teams use statistical approaches. Others use experimental approaches or gut-checks. Similarly, some teams talk informally and spontaneously and hold casual meetings. Others require documented communication and hold formal meetings.

Periodically review the approach as you track progress toward your goal. If what you're doing isn't working, do something else. Adapt your approach to achieve the desired outcome.

Size. The team must be large enough to contain the skills and resources to accomplish its goals, but small enough to be manageable and efficient. Smaller teams are easier to manage than larger teams. Usually, work teams should be less than 25 people; teams of 5 to 6 people are best.

Teams vs. groups

A team is more than just a group of people because it has the following elements:

1. A reason or purpose for working together. You form a team for a reason and you expect an outcome from the team. Teams are goal- or outcome-oriented, distinguishing them from groups of people who merely meet or socialize. A team wants to achieve something together.

2. Complementary skills. Team members contribute to the success of the team by using their unique skills and talents. The team must have the appropriate skills to accomplish its goals, and the skills of team members must complement one another.

3. A common approach. A team pulls together by using a common approach or methodology for achieving its goals. A team uses accepted ways of working together; teamwork is a process for getting things done.

4. Group accountability. A team holds itself accountable for achieving its goals. Although individuals may be accountable for completing specific tasks, the team succeeds as a whole. If one member achieves his or her goals but the team does not achieve the team goal, neither succeeds.

5. Team spirit. Effective team members believe that working together leads to better results than working alone. This is the reason for working in teams. If your team can't achieve more working together than individual team members can achieve working alone, disband your team.

Trust. Synergy comes from trust and commitment. Teams build trust by sharing common experiences, particularly if the experiences contain a risk where team members are

dependent upon each other. You create trust through repeated, consistent behavior over time. You can't talk your way into a trusting relationship; you can only behave yourself into it.

Commitment. Team members must be committed to achieving team goals. Commitment comes from involvement. Involve team members by encouraging them to take meaningful action toward achieving team goals.

People are more likely to fulfill their commitment if they believe they are committing voluntarily, if they understand why they must achieve goals, and if they believe they can influence how things are done. When possible, let teams determine how they will achieve their team goals.

If you always dictate how things must get done, you will undermine and destroy the team's sense of commitment. To empower teams, assign goals and let people figure out how to achieve the goals.

Avoid team mania

Effective teams work on meaningful projects. Beware of trivializing teams.

Abraham Maslow described the "Law of the Hammer." If you give a child a hammer, the child will find nails to pound. The Law of the Hammer can apply to companies creating team environments.

A common mistake is to create teams for every problem. The result is team mania. Team hysteria quickly overwhelms many employees. Soon, they don't get their normal work done because they are involved with six or seven teams. This causes disenchantment and erodes commitment to team participation.

To create an effective team, create a big goal that excites people. The goal should be bigger than the individuals on the team. Effective sports teams set goals to win championships, then develop the skills necessary to win those championships. The same principle applies to work teams.

The fastest route to team success is to avoid the

Effective vs.

ineffective teams

High- and low-performing teams have different characteristics. Low-performing teams usually have the following attributes:

- No results
- Unclear goals
- Shifting goals and priorities
- Poor communication
- Lack of trust
- Lack of commitment
- Lack of cooperation
- Wrong skills or inadequate skills
- Strong or overpowering individualism

In contrast, high-performing teams exhibit the following characteristics:

- Purpose and common vision
- Ability to take action
- Flexibility
- Effective communication
- Strong personal commitment
- Strong relationships
- Accountability for results
- Sense of participating in something bigger and better than self
- Ambitious performance goals
- Commitment to long-term progress

characteristics of ineffective teams and to model successful teams. Creating effective work teams is easier when you follow the basics of team building. When in doubt, don't try to get fancy. Stick with team basics.

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- Sensitivity to individual differences
- Seeing each other as colleagues

The difference between effective and ineffective teams is how they pull together. Ineffective teams lack alignment and members pull in different directions. The result is wasted energy. By contrast, effective team members pull in the same direction to achieve the team's goals.

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